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ABSTRACT

With character education as one of the fastest growing reform movements in education today, counselor educators and counseling students need to be informed and cognizant of various character education programs. Currently, more than 30 states mandate some aspect of character education and school counselors are frequently responsible for introducing character education curricula to their schools. However, research suggests that counselor education programs are not emphasizing character education in their preparation programs. This digest highlights the various types of character education programs and, specifically, how character education fits into counselor education. (Contains 15 references.) (GCP)

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Character Education: What Counselor Educators Need to Know

Kimberly A. Vess & Duane A. Halbur

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Introduction

Character education is the "fastest growing reform movement in P-12 education today" (Williams, 2000, p. 32), thus all counselor educators and counseling students need to be informed and cognizant of various P-12 character education programs. Currently, more than 30 states mandate some aspect of character education (Otten, 2000) and school counselors are frequently responsible for introducing character education curricula to their schools. However, research suggests that counselor education programs are not emphasizing character education in their preparation programs (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999).

Definitions and Approaches

What is character education and how does it affect education? Williams & Schnaps (1999) detail the work of the now defunct National Commission on Character Education, formed in 1997, to answer these questions. The Commission defined the term character education as "any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, help children and youth become caring, principled and responsible" (Williams & Schnaps, 1999). According to Williams (2000), the Commission used character education as an umbrella term that encompasses diverse approaches, philosophies and programs. Problem solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution are important aspects of developing moral character. Character education offers students opportunities to experience these traits directly. Typically, the goals of character education are to help children become morally responsible, self-disciplined citizens (McBrien & Brandt, 1997). The American School Counselor Association stated that the purpose of character education is to "assist students in becoming positive and self-directed in their lives and education and in striving toward future goals" (ASCA, 1998). These goals are carried out by teaching children about basic human values such as honesty, kindness, generosity, courage, freedom, equality, and respect (McBrien & Brandt, 1997).

Types of programs

Numerous types of character education programs exist. Williams and Schnaps (1999) provided a thorough description of five major theoretical perspectives of character education: Watson's community of caring (1989); DeVries's constructive approach (1998); Berkowitz's child development perspective (1985, 1999); Lickona's eclectic approach (Lickona, 1991); and Ryan's traditional approach (Ryan, 1995). In a later study, Williams (2000) delineated four commonalities among the five theories. First, each theory involves direct instruction wherein youth are inculcated with virtues of society through training on habits or virtuous behavior (including Ryan [1995], Lickona [1991], and Berkowitz [1985]). Second, indirect instruction is a common component of character education. Williams and Schnaps (1999, p. 12) defined indirect instruction as "building a child's understanding which is believed to lead to interpersonal interactions of peers under the guidance of caring adults." Williams and Schnaps (1999) cited theorists DeVries, Lickona, Watson, and Berkowitz as participating in indirect instruction. Third, theorists Watson (1989) and Berkowitz (1999) included community building in their theories. Community building enhances moral character through caring relationships and environments. Fourth, all character education theories utilized adults as role models.

Many commercial programs available for purchase are based on the work of these theorists. Since many school counselors will find themselves in a "position to be effective in designing, initiating, and supporting a character education curriculum" (ASCA position statement, 1998), understanding the theoretical differences and similarities of character education programs is important.

Sample Programs

Frequently, school systems purchase and utilize commercial character education programs such as: *American Promise*, *Character Works*, *Character Counts* and *Character Matters*. These programs include teaching materials designed to infuse such character values as trustworthiness, responsibility, respect, fairness, caring and citizenship into the school curriculum. Otten (2000) stated that character education is integrated into the school community as a strategy to help re-engage students, deal with conflict, keep students on task in the learning environment, and reinvest the community with active participation by citizens in political and civic life. With the popularity of character education programs in P-12 education, counselors need to be educated how to incorporate character education components into counseling program curricula.

How Does Character Education Fit Into Counselor Education?

When character education is implemented in a school system, it is often the school counselor who coordinates the program. Since school counselors are typically in a position to assist students with developmental concerns and mental health issues, it is imperative that they be familiar with character education programs. The American School Counselor Association supports character education in the schools, stating that professional school counselors need to "take an active role in initiating, facilitating and promoting character education programs in the school curriculum. The professional school counselor, as a part of the school community and as a highly resourceful person, takes an active role by working cooperatively with the teachers and administration in providing character education in the schools as an integral part of the school curriculum and activities" (ASCA, 1998).

As character education continues to play a vital role in P-12 education, it is important to prepare counselors for this facet of their professional positions. However, research suggests that counselor education programs have yet to reflect this new national priority in their course content (Ryan, & Bohlin, 2000). Some authors have suggested that counselor educators avoid character education because it feels contrary to academic freedom, infringes on faculty beliefs about privacy or personal behavior, or because they are fearful of inculcating values in higher education settings (Ryan, & Bohlin, 2000; Williams & Schnaps, 1999). Though these may be concerns of counselor educators, it can be argued that all forms of education contain the teaching of values (Williams, 2000). If counselor educators are to serve as models for the profession, it would stand to reason that character education be included in counselor preparation. More specifically, prospective school counselors need to be taught to select, teach, and facilitate character education programs. They must learn how to involve all stakeholders, including students and parents, in successful program implementation.

Conclusion

Character education is the fastest growing school-based movement (Williams, 2000). The character education movement affects counselors and counselor educators. The counseling profession strives to aid P-12 youth in developing academic skills and also to assist in the development of values, character, self-directed behavior, generosity, equality and respect (ASCA, 1998; McBrien & Brandt, 1997). Teachers, staff, parents and administrators are looking to school and mental health counselors to guide them in the character education

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component of P-12 education. Therefore, information on character education programs needs to be incorporated into counselor education programs. Counselor educators owe it to students to prepare them to understand the common foundations of the various marketed character education programs. Counselor educators who assist counseling students with this competence are modeling professionalism, advocacy and the need to stay up to date. However, the ultimate payoff is counselors who are more equipped and confident to commence and encourage character education programs for P-12 youth.

Resources

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